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THE WOMEN OF ORIENS CHRISTIANUS ARABICUS IN PRE-ISLAMIC TIMES*

BY
Irfan SHAHĪD

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*) Abbreviations:

- BROCK and HARVEY, *Holy Women* = Sebastian P. BROCK and Susan ASHBROOK HARVEY, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (University of California Press, 1987).
- EUSEBIUS, *E.H.* = EUSEBIUS, *Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library, ed. H.J. LAWLOR, trans. J.E.L. OULTON (Harvard University Press, Reprint 1994), vols. I-II.
- ḤAMZAH, *Tārīḫ* = Ḥamzah l-Isfahānī, *Tārīḫ* (Beirut, 1961).
- *Letter-Martyrs* = The Second Letter of Simeon of Bēth-Aršām published in Irfan SHAHĪD, *The Martyrs of Nağrān*, in *Subsidia Hagiographica* 49 (Brussels, 1971).
- MOBERG, *Book* = *The Book of the Himyarites*, ed. and trans. Axel MOBERG (Lund, 1924).
- NÖLDEKE, *GF* = Theodor NÖLDEKE, *Die Gassanischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Gafna's* (Berlin, 1887).
- SHAHĪD, *Byzantium in South Arabia* = Irfan SHAHĪD, «Byzantium in South Arabia», in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979) 23-94.
- SHAHĪD, *BASIC* I = Irfan SHAHĪD, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, I:1-2 (Washington, D.C., 1995).
- YĀQŪT, *Muᶜğam* = YĀQŪT, *Muᶜğam l-Buldān* (Beirut, 1956), vol. II.

INTRODUCTION

Of the three Abrahamic religions, Christianity has been the one in which women played a most important role, which begins with Mary Theotokos, involving the Virgin Birth of Jesus and the Mystery of the Incarnation. This important role continued throughout the lifetime of Jesus, the Apostolic Age, and the Early Church. It, indeed, continued throughout Christian history despite the check that women's role in the Church received at the hands of such Fathers as Tertullian. The strong impetus to women's role in society, imparted by the Feminist Movement in our times, has not left the Church and the role of women in it unaffected as women are resuming their previous active role in the Church and their former positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. One result of all this is the explosion of gender studies including ecclesiastical history. This has reached our own Christian Orient when in 1987 the work of Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, appeared in print. However, no work has appeared, specifically and exclusively devoted to the history of the women of the Arab Christian Orient. This Orient is the most understudied and the least understood of all the sectors of Oriens Christianus and so is *a fortiori*, the role of its women. This paper tries to make good this omission and redress this unsatisfactory state of research. Because of the constraints of time it cannot be more than a survey, preluding an extensive and detailed treatment in a future publication. As will be seen from this quick survey, the women of this Arab Christian Orient had an extensive presence and on certain occasions that presence was crucial and also unique. In the interests of clarity, the treatment will first discuss the lay women of this Arab Orient, women who were influential as empresses, queens, and princesses, and then discuss the Arab churchwomen both as martyresses and as members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

A. LAY WOMEN

The list of Arab imperial women begins at Edessa where around A.D. 200, its Arab king Abgar VIII, titled the Great, converted to Christianity. He certainly was married and his wife would also have been converted to the same faith. The circumstances of his conversion are unknown but it is not impossible that it was effected through the influence of his wife[1], which, if

1) Bar-Dayṣān has also been suggested as an influence: see J.S. TRIMINGHAM, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (Longman, London and New York, 1979) 134.

true, would be another example of the influence of women on the conversion of their husbands or sons[2]. The extant sources say nothing about Abgar's wife but a dedication to Queen Shalmath in Syriac on one of the columns that still stands could refer to her[3].The next Arab imperial woman is Julia Mamaea[4], the niece of her more famous aunt, Julia Domna, the wife of the emperor Septimius Severus. Eusebius[5] vouches for her Christianity in no ambiguous terms and for that of her son, the emperor Severus Alexander (222-235), but the statement is contested by some scholars[6]. However, there is no doubt about her influence on her son. She jealously controlled the education of her son, Severus Alexianus (later Severus Alexander), channelling it into the paths of virtue and a serious life, and shielding him from the pernicious influences of his licentious cousin, Elagabalus[7]. Such training must surely have disposed the young Severus to be receptive to a faith such as Christianity. Mamaea's relationship to Christianity is more explicitly reflected in her association with Origen and Hippolytus. The former she summoned to her in Antioch where she discussed with him religious issues; the latter remembered her in the dedication of one of his volumes[8]. Such contacts surely argue either for a Christian affiliation of some sort or for Mamaea's most sympathetic attitude towards Christianity. The rulers of the

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2) On the spread of Christianity among women especially prominent women, see A. HARNACK, *The Mission and Spread of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, James MOFFAT, trans. and ed. (London and New York, 1908), vol. II, pp. 64-84. Female influence may be illustrated by the case of Helen on Constantine, and of Clotilda on Clovis.

3) See J.B. SEGAL, *Edessa «The Blessed City»* (Oxford, 1970) 26. Segal further suggests that she also had been represented by a statue sculpted for her. Syriac Shalmath reflects a good Arab name, Salmā, Salāma, or Sallāmah, and it is the same name that the wife of the earlier Abgar, Christ's contemporary, had; or is said to have had; *ibid.*, 70. So it could have been a dynastic name that recurred just as Maʿn and Abgar did in the genealogy of this Arab Edessene dynasty. Hopefully, excavations will reveal a mosaic that portrays Abgar VIII and his wife as they have revealed the so-called Family Portrait Mosaic of some Edessene citizens for which, see *ibid.*, Plate I. For a translation of the Syriac inscription, see *idem*, «Some Syriac Inscriptions of the 2nd-3rd Century A.D.», in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 16 (1954) 29-30.

4) Mamaea is a good old Arab name which is attested earlier in Emesa (Ḥimṣ), the native city of the Arab Severan empresses. The earlier Mamaea was the daughter of Samsigeram II, for whom see C. CHAD, *Les Dynasts d'Émèse* (Beyrouth, Dar el-Mashriq, 1972) 68. On the Arab names of the Severan empresses hailing from Emesa, see the present writer in *Rome and the Arabs* (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., 1984) 41-42.

5) EUSEBIUS, *E.H.*, VI:XXI:3.

6) On the critical attitude of modern scholars to Mamaea's Christianity and the sources that vouch for it, see Erich KETTENHOFEN, *Die syrischen Augustae in der historischen Überlieferung: ein Beitrag zum Problem der Orientalisierung* (Bonn, 1979) 69-73.

7) On this, see HERODIAN, *History* (Loeb Classical Library), Book V:VII:4-5.

8) On Origen and Hippolytus, see EUSEBIUS, *E.H.*, VI:XXI:1 and XXII:1.

Roman world could not at this stage flaunt their Christianity since they had to perform pagan rites if they wanted to stay in power, as did the undoubtedly Christian Arab emperor Philip, when among other things, he celebrated the Secular Games in A.D. 248.

The third and last is none other than an empress in the purple, the wife of the first Christian Roman emperor, Philip (244-249)[9]. Like her husband Philip, and unlike Mamaea, she had a non-Arab name, Marcia Otacilia Severa. With her husband, she ruled the Roman world for a quinquennium and it was during that duration that she received a letter from Origen[10] as did her husband. She met a violent death in Rome after her husband, the emperor Philip, died in battle at Verona in A.D. 249. A bust of hers or thought to be hers, rests in one of the Museums of Copenhagen[11].

The fourth in the list is Mavia of the fourth century, well known to the ecclesiastical historians Socrates and Sozomen, who supply significant details on the career of this extraordinary Arab Christian queen[12], the widow of the deceased federate king. Not only is her Christianity certain, but also her intimate involvement in the Christian doctrinal controversies of the fourth century. Furthermore she was an activist, who actually waged a holy war in the interest of Nicene Orthodoxy against the Arian emperor Valens, and what is more, won the war after leading her troops personally in battle. After her victory, she dictated a peace that stipulated that the bishop of her people must be the orthodox Moses and not an Arian bishop, a condition the emperor met. She had a daughter, whom Victor the *magister equitum* (Master of Horse) in the Orient married and as a loyal federate and a good Christian she sent a contingent of Christian Arab troops for the defence of the «God-guarded city», Constantinople, against the Goths. The speed of her Arab horses, the horsemanship of their riders, and the irresistible thrust of their long pikes ensured victory over the Goths, who then recrossed the Danube after winning their historical victory at Adrianople in A.D. 378.

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9) On all that pertains to the Christianity of Philip the Arab see the detailed chapter of the present writer's *Rome and the Arabs*, pp. 65-93.

10) 10. EUSEBIUS, *E.H.*, VI:XXXVI:3.

11) Little is known about Marcia Otacilia Severa: for a prosopography of her, see *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, Leiva PETERSEN, ed. (Berlin, 1983), Pars V, Fasiculus 2, pp. 194-195.

12) On Mavia, see the detailed chapter written by the present writer in *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., 1984) 138-201, 567-568.

Mavia belongs to that period in Arab-Byzantine relations that lasted for three centuries after the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century. All the Arab federate kings in Oriens were Christians, the Tanūḫids of the fourth century, the Salīḥids of the fifth and the Ġassānids of the sixth. Naturally their queens were also Christian. Of these, Mavia is the only one on whom history is not silent. The others survive as mere names because of the problem of source survival. Nevertheless, these federate queens were or must have been influential as is inferable from the onomasticon of the Ġassānid queens in the sixth century. But before these are discussed, mention may be made of the only Christian Arab princess in the extant fifth century, a Salīḥid, who remains anonymous in the sources, the daughter of the Salīḥid King Dāwūd (David), with whose name is associated Dayr Dāwūd, the monastery of David, not far from Sergiopolis[13]. She is distinguished by having been a poetess and one single verse of hers has survived, a riposte to the triplet composed by the murderers of her father, the two regicides, who unlike the princess have not remained anonymous since they are clearly named in her verse. It is not entirely ruled out that she may have composed some Christian poetry in much the same way that poets composed epinician odes on the victory scored by the orthodox Mavia over Arian Valens, odes that survived well into the fifth century, as recorded by Sozomen, and these might or even must have expressed some Christian sentiments since the war was a religious war conducted in behalf of Nicene Orthodoxy against Arian heresy.

The Arabic sources, especially contemporary Arabic poetry composed on the Ġassānids, reveal the names of the Ġassānid queens, three of them and possibly four. The first is called Māriya (Mary), who was according to some sources[14], the mother of the famous Ġassānid king, al-Ḥāriṯ and wife of his father Jabala, who died in A.D. 528 at the battle of Ṯannūris[15]. The poetry reveals the names of two queens, each called Hind, but belonging to two different generations in the genealogy of the Ġassānid Royal House[16].

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13) On the Salīḥids, the Christian Arab federates of Byzantium in the fifth century, see the present writer in *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., 1989) 233-331. On the Salīḥid poetess/princess see *ibid.*, pp. 436-438.

14) NÖLDEKE in a very persuasive paragraph contested this and thought that Māriya was the mother of a later Ġassānid king, a contemporary of the poet Ḥassān, who mentions him in one of his verses; see T. NÖLDEKE, *GF*, pp. 22-23.

15) See SHAHĪD, *BASIC* I, pp. 76-79.

16) See T. NÖLDEKE, *GF*, pp.33-34, for an analysis of the poetic fragment where the two Hinds are mentioned.

And finally a queen by the name of Salmā, who may have been a Ġassānid or a Laḫmid queen, most probably the former[17]. The first, Māriya, is either the resoundingly Christian name Mary, in its Greek form, Maria, or the Syriac term for «mistress» as Nöldeke thought[18].

Hind is an Arabic name, possibly assumed after the famous Laḫmid queen of Ḥīrā, who was a Kindite princess. The two Ġassānid queens may have been Kindite princesses, since the two Royal Houses, Ġassān and Kinda, were on good terms and were further drawn to each other by their conversion to Christianity. Salmā, like Hind and unlike Māriya, is an Arab name, a version of which was assumed by the Arab queen of Edessa. The Ġassānid queens, like their husbands, the Ġassānid kings, continued to assume strictly Arab names, evidence of their strong sense of Arab identity[19].

The exiguous extant sources are silent on the role of these Ġassānid queens but they must have been influential, witness the fact that four of the Ġassānid kings were known, not by their patronymics but by their matronymics[20], which suggests that they were powerful and influential personalities. The sources, however, give a glimpse of the contribution of these queens to the fortunes of Christianity in Oriens when they refer to a Dayr Hind, the monastery of Hind, which they locate near Damascus in Phoenice Libanensis. The Muslim author, Ḥamza, explicitly states that this was a Ġassānid foundation although he attributes its building to the Ġassānid king, ᶜAmr ibn-Jafna[21]. However, Hind as part of the name of the Dayr suggests strongly the queen as builder. Ḥamza may have erroneously attributed it to the king, alternatively, the king may have built it in honor of the queen. The first explanation is the more plausible, and if true, the monastery would have

17) For an analysis of this matronymic and the name Salmā, see NÖLDEKE, *GF*, pp. 43-44, where he argues for her Ġassānid affiliation.

18) NÖLDEKE, *GF*, p. 22, n.3, where he refers to his *Mandäische Grammatik*, in which he argued that it has nothing to do with Maria and that it means *Herrin*, «mistress». But the *taw* of the feminine suffix in Syriac *marthā*, mistress, is missing in Māriya. Furthermore, the name surfaces in the thirties of the seventh century in this form as the name of the Coptic maiden sent to Muḥammad in Medina by the then governor of Egypt, according to most, Cyrus, the Chalcedonian Patriarch of Alexandria. As a name for an Egyptian Christian, it was almost certainly Maria/Mary and not Syriac *marthā*, or Māriya, mistress, since Coptic Egypt did not belong to the *Semitic* Christian Orient where Syriac prevailed.

19) The Ġassānid queens and their names will be treated in detail by the present writer in the second part of his volume, *BASIC*, which is in preparation.

20) Ibn-Māriya; Ibn-Hind (twice); and Ibn-Salmā.

21) See ḤAMZAH, *Tārīḫ*, p. 99, where the Dayr through a scribal error is called Dayr Hunād, clearly a transcriptional error for Hind, as revealed in YĀQŪT, *Muᶜğam*, vol.II, p. 543.

been a nunnery. The queens of the Ġassānid dynasty may well have founded nunneries, thus imitating their husbands who built monasteries for monks, six of which are attributed to the two kings, ᶜAmr and al-Ayham[22]. And in so doing they also may have followed the lead of their more famous namesake, the Kindite Princess, Hind, who became the Laḫmid queen in Ḥīrā, the wife of King Munḏir.

The Christian Kindites of central and northern Arabia cannot be left out in this discussion[23]. Despite the silence of the exiguous sources on their conversion or rather its circumstances, their Christianity is beyond doubt and is reflected most clearly in the life of the princess to whom reference has already been made, namely, Hind, whose Christianity goes back to the days of her maidenhood when she was still a Kindite princess before she became a Laḫmid queen[24]. Her prestige was such that her son, King ᶜAmr, was not known by his patronymic that related him to his formidable father, who filled fifty years of the century with his military presence[25], but by his matronymic, ᶜAmr-ibn-Hind. She is especially important because she founded the famous monastery of Hind, Dayr Hind, in Ḥīrā, most probably a nunnery, but more importantly, because of the inscription she had engraved in its chapel and which has miraculously survived the ravages of time, copied by the Muslim historian Hišām al-Kalbī and preserved in the works of Bakrī and Yāqūt[26]. It is truly a unique document not only for the true state of the Arabic language around the middle of the sixth century but also for the Christian sentiments it breathes so clearly, from which many conclusions

22) ḤAMZAH, *Tārīḫ*, pp. 99, 101, where the names of the six monasteries are also given.

23) The Kindites of the *South* moved in the political and cultural orbit of Ḥimyar, the Judaism of which was most evident during the reign of Yūsuf around A.D. 520 and there is no doubt that those Kindites who moved in that orbit adopted the religion of their overlords; see Michael LECKER, «Judaism Among Kinda and the *Ridda* of Kinda», in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115 (1995) 635-650.

24) The Laḫmids to whose king she was married were not Christian but their last king, Nuᶜmān, finally adopted Christianity towards the end of the century. On Hind's Christianity, see SHAHĪD, *BASIC* I, pp. 696-697.

25) As stated and understood even by Procopius for whom, see *History* (Loeb Classical Library), Book I:xvii:40.

26) For the inscription, see YĀQŪT, *Muᶜǧam*, vol.II, p. 542 and BAKRĪ, *Muᶜǧam mā Istaᶜǧam*, ed. M. AL-SAQQĀ (Cairo, 1947), vol.II, p.606. On Hišām and his recovery of the inscription and others that have disappeared, see the present writer in *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., 1984) 349-366. The inscription in both BAKRĪ and YĀQŪT is in an excellent state of preservation but it presents a few textual problems. These will be discussed in a future publication in which the inscription is intensively analyzed.

may be drawn on the history of the Arabs on the eve of the rise of Islam. It reads as follows[27]:

«بَنَتْ هذه البيعة هند بنت الحارث بن عمرو بن حُجَر، المِلكة بنت الأمـلاك، وأُمّ الملـك عمرو بن المنذر، أَمَةُ المَسِيح، وأُمّ عَبده، وابنَةُ عَبْده، في زمن ملك الأملاك، خُسْرَو أنوشِـرْوان، وفي زمن أفراييم الأُسقف. فالإله الذي بنتْ له هذا البيت يغفر خَطيئتَها، ويترحَّم عليهـا وعلـى ولدها، ويقبل بهما ويقومهما إلى إقامة الحق؛ ويكون الإله معها ومع ولدها الدّهر الدّاهر».

That Hind may have been the inspiration for the foundation of nunneries by Ġassānid queens may derive some support from the fact that the last Laḫmid princess, and a namesake of hers, founded another monastery also known as Dayr Hind. This was the daughter of the Laḫmid king, Nuʿmān III, who towards the end of the century adopted Christianity in its Nestorian form[28]. One source states that Dayr Hind was a votive monastery built by Hind after the fulfillment of her vow that involved the return of her father Nuʿmān from captivity[29]. Whatever the circumstances that attended the erection of the monastery were, Hind appeared as a nun who lived in her Dayr Hind when Ḥīrah capitulated to Ḫālid ibn al-Walīd in A.D. 633.

B. CHURCH WOMEN

So much for the lay imperial women of the Arab Christian Orient. The other category of the women of this Orient, namely those who were church women[30], is not well attested and reference to its members in the sources is

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27) In spite of the conversion of Kinda to Islam, apparently some members of it remained Christian as did other Christian Arab groups such as the Taġlibids. Its Christianity is impressively transmitted even as late as the ninth century by one of its scions, namely, ʿAbd l-Masīḥ ibn-Isḥaq l-Kindī in his defence of Christianity, which he wrote in reply to a Muslim friend of his, ʿAbd Allāh ibn-Ismāʿīl al-Hāšimī, who had asked him to embrace Islam; for a succinct discussion of this defence and the controversy around it, see G. TROUPEAU, in *EI*^{2}, s.v. «al-Kindī, ʿAbd al-Masīḥ b. Isḥāk». The discussion of the Christianity of Kinda in pre-Islamic times provides the remote background for the sudden appearance of this eloquent defence of Christianity in the ninth century, which without it remains isolated. The inscription engraved by Hind supplies evidence for the attachment of Kinda to Christainity, harmoniously with and confirmatory of what the later Kindite says in its defence. The seventh century inscription and the ninth century defence are thus two important and related documents, the one epigraphic, the other literary, which complement each other and present a powerful expression of Christianity by members of this distinguished Royal House, which *inter alia*, produced the foremost poet of pre-Islamic Arabia.

28) See G. ROTHSTEIN, *Die Dynastie der Laḫmiden in al-Ḥīrā* (Berlin, 1899) 142-143.

29) See YĀQŪT, *Muʿǧam*, p. 541.

30) For the women of this category involving much of Oriens Christianus, and not only

practically limited to the distant Arabian South, especially the Arab city of Naǧrān[31], and this is so because of the problem of source survival. Luckily the contemporary Syriac sources present a complete picture of the Church of Naǧrān, its hierarchy and its religious establishments. These sources consist of the *Book of the Ḥimyarites* and the *Letters* of Simeon of Bēth Aršām[32]. As far as the Arab Church women are concerned, they may be classified as follows:

1. The *Book of the Ḥimyarites* makes a precious reference to the existence of that mysterious group of religious men and women called the Sons of the Covenant and to a lesser degree to the Daughters of the Covenant, referred to in the singular as in the case of Ammai and again of 'Dᶜa[33]. But it is the newly discovered *Letter* of Simeon, dispatched from the Ġassānid military camp at Jābiya that is more expansive on the Daughters of the Covenant. It refers to them in the plural as a group[34], a clear indication that the reference in the *Book* to Ammai and 'Dᶜa, each as a Daughter of the Covenant did not reflect isolated instances of the existence of this group in Arab Naǧrān.

The *Letter* provides instructive hints on these Sons and Daughters of the Covenant. The account of the martyrdom of Abraham[35], the Son of the Covenant, indicates that on his becoming one he changed his name from Arabic Malik into a Biblical one, Abraham, and that he had a teacher. Analogously, the Daughters of the Covenant must also have changed their

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the Arab one, see Sebastian P. BROCK and Susan ASHBROOK HARVEY, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987). The literature on holy women has become extensive, the most recent of which is *Holy Women of Byzantium*, ed. Alice-Mary TALBOT (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., 1996). The Arab Holy Women treated in this article belonged not only to the world of the Christian Orient but also to that of Byzantium, since the Arabs moved in the political and cultural orbit of the latter; hence the relevance of these two cited works.

31) The counterpart of Ḥīrah in the north east, as the great Arab pre-Islamic center of Christianity in the south west.

32) MOBERG, *Book*. Of the *Letters* of Simeon of Bēth-Aršām, the most recently discovered *Letter* by the present writer is the most relevant for which, see *Letter-Martyrs*.

33) See MOBERG, *Book*, p. 4a, lines 15, 18; p. 4b, lines 7-8; and p. 5b, line 13. MOBERG translated the references to the Sons of the Covenant as «brothers of the holy order» and to the Daughter of the Covenant as «sister of the holy order»; *ibid.*, CII-CIII. Although the term *qyāmā* is controversial as to how it should be translated, there is no doubt that the original Syriac reads Sons and Daughters, not brethen and sisters. On these see *Letter-Martyrs*, pp. 250-251.

34) *Letter-Martyrs*, p. XVII, line 24 and p. 54, line 6.

35) On Abraham, see *Letter-Martyrs*, p. XXVIII, lines 8-21 and p. 61.

names[36] into Biblical ones and must have had teachers to instruct them in Christian doctrine. They are distinguished from the laity and also from the nuns. But their association with the nuns in the *Letter* when both were about to be martyred could perhaps suggest that these Daughters of the Covenant were novices serving a probationary period before taking vows and entering the monastic life. The association of Ammai, the Daughter of the Covenant with the Deaconess Elišaba^{c} (Elizabeth)[37] could suggest that the Deaconess may have been her instructress in Christian doctrine, as indeed deaconesses used to minister to the needs of women in the days of the early Church, such as instructing the catechumens among them.

2. The *Book of the Ḥimyarites* is silent on nuns in Naǧrān but the *Letter* of Simeon is not; there is a clear reference to them[38] in the same sentence in which there is reference to the Daughters of the Covenant. This implies that Naǧrān witnessed the spread and advent of monasticism to it either from Byzantine Mesopotamia or Ethiopia. Nuns imply nunneries and the presumption is that Naǧrān had or must have had a nunnery[39]. Monasteries in Naǧrān are attested in the later Islamic sources but it is not clear whether they included nunneries[40].

3. Both the *Book* and the *Letter* of Simeon refer to the Deaconess Elišaba^{c} (Elizabeth)[41]. Naǧrān's was a conservative society; the chief woman in Naǧrān, Ruhm/Ruhayma[42], wore a veil in public. It was therefore only natural that the office of the female diaconate should have existed in Naǧrān for performing certain ecclesiastical duties and functions involving women for reasons of propriety.

4. The most important of all these Arab women of the Church of Naǧrān are of course the martyresses, almost a hundred of them, who laid

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36) Ammai does not seem to have changed her name, or not yet.

37) See MOBERG, *Book*, p. 4b, lines 6-8, and p. CII.

38) *Letter-Martyrs*, p. XVII, line 24 and p. 54, line 6.

39) I am inclined to believe that the name al-Haygumāna, which appears in the Arabic female onomasticon of pre-Islamic times, may be Greek ἡγουμένη the mother superior/abbess, evidence of the existence of nunneries in the world of the pre-Islamic Arabs.

40) On Naǧrān's religious establishments in the sixth century, see the present writer, «Byzantium in South Arabia», *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979) 23-94, esp. 69-76.

41) For the Deaconess Elizabeth, see MOBERG, *Book*, p. CXIV and the much fuller account in *Letter-Martyrs*, pp. 47-48. As this office of the Early Church was later abolished, it is of interest to note that it existed in sixth century Naǧrān. For the importance of women in the Early Church and their leadership, see Karen Jo TORJESEN, *When Women Were Priests* (Harper, San Francisco, 1993).

42) *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

down their life around the year A.D. 520, and were canonized by the Universal Church which celebrates their feast on October 24. These martyrdoms were unique in that they took place after the Peace of the Church and the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313, some two hundred years after the age of confessors and martyrs had come to an end. Together with about two hundred male martyrs, these martyresses represent the contribution of the Christian Arabs and the Arab Church to the spiritual annals of the Universal Ecclesia, a contribution that shortly after made of Naǧrān a city of martyrs, the Arabian Martyropolis pilgrimage center and a holy city, which took its place in the Christian Orient, especially the Monophysite one, alongside Etchmiadzin, Edessa, Abū-Mīna, and Axum, the holy cities of the Armenians, the Syrians, the Copts and the Ethiopians respectively. What is relevant in the context of this paper on Arab churchwomen is to mark the significance of the martyresses.

a. Their number: this is preserved in the *Book of the Ḥimyarites*, about a hundred, in a list[43] that carefully gives their names. That a single locale, such as Naǧrān, should have contributed a hundred martyresses was certainly a most remarkable event in the history of the Church in the Orient, perhaps unrivalled anywhere else even in the age of the persecuted church, before the Edict of Milan.

b. Although the synaxaria and the menologia give prominence to Ruhm/Ruhayma as the chief martyress, all the hundred women who died for their faith are equal in the order of Saintliness, but these are never mentioned by their names, only as the companions of the chief martyr, Arethas, and the chief martyress, Ruhm. The *Book of the Ḥimyarites* makes possible the recovery of their names, about a hundred, thus relieving them of the dismissiveness that attaches to the short account in the synaxaria and the menologia, which omits reciting their names. In this case, the names are not mere names; they are powerfully evocative of the passionate drama enacted by a century of Arab Christian martyresses.

c. The onomasticon itself, a list of the names of about one hundred Arab women, is a gift to the onomatologist. Most genealogical works in Arabic are those of men and these are listed according to their tribal affiliations. This list of martyresses in Naǧrān departs radically from all Arabic genealogical works in two respects: it is a list of Arab *women*, and they are united not by tribal affiliations but by their martyrdom, and it is an urban list, not a

43) See MOBERG, *Book*, p. CXXI.

tribal one, united by the city of martyrs, Naǧrān.

5. Finally, the Syriac sources for the Arab martyrs of Naǧrān have preserved the speech delivered by the chief martyress Ruhm/Ruhayma[44]. Although it may have been «retouched» by later hagiographers, there is no doubt that the principal themes and sentiments in the speech are genuine and sometimes reflect an Arab female *ethos*. Thus it is a valuable document that has preserved almost the *ipsissima verba*, the voice of the Arab martyress from the distant past of the sixth century, almost as valuable as the inscription left by Hind, the Kindite princess and Laḫmid queen of Ḥīrā. The speech has survived only in its Syriac version and its survival is another evidence for the custodial function of these sources for reconstructing the history of the Arabs and Arab Christianity before the rise of Islam.

C. THE ETHNIC IDENTITY OF THE MARTYRESSES OF NAǦRĀN

In the late eighties, Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey gave an account of the martyresses of Naǧrān as a section in their volume, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*[45]. This account is welcome, coming as it does, from two distinguished Syrologists, who had illuminated many facets of Oriens Christianus Syriacus and have done it again in the Introductions to this volume, both the general and the sectional ones, as well as in their footnotes[46].

Although the martyresses died in Naǧrān, in distant South Arabia, the inclusion of a section on them is not unjustifiable in a volume on the *Syrian* Orient in view of the importance of the Syriac language as the custodian of the records of these holy women and of the Syrian version of Christianity in the history of the Early Church, including its South Arabian sector. However, the martyresses of Naǧrān were neither Syrian nor Syriac-speaking but

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44) *Letter-Martyrs*, pp. 57-58.

45) See BROCK and HARVEY, *Holy Women*, pp. 100-121.

46) These are perceptive and I should like to thank the two authors for their thoughtful reflections on the text of the Second Letter of Simeon of Bēth Aršām, which I published in 1971. I go along with their suggestion on p. 108 n.16, that the name of the chief martyress should be retained as Ruhm. I gave reasons for choosing Ruhayma in *Letter-Martyrs*, p. 83 and also later in «Byzantium in South Arabia», pp. 76-78, in which the name of the locality near Irāqī Naǧrān, Ruhayma, is discussed. Now I think that Ruhayma may have been the burial place of her *granddaughter*, which explains the diminuitive. Ruhm should therefore be kept as the name of the chief martyress; my further readings in Arabic genealogical works since the publications of *Letter-Martyrs* have revealed that the name Ruhm was not uncommon.

were Arab and Arabic-speaking.

The two authors are Syrologists understandably not interested primarily in the ethnic and linguistic complexion of Naǧrān, and so they simply and objectively[47] refer the reader to where he or she can pursue this aspect of the history of the martyresses. However, the inclusion of a section on the martyrdoms in Naǧrān in a book titled *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, obscures the identity of these martyrs, whose city, Naǧrān, was so far away from Syria, and the larger Syria, «which lay along the eastern Mediterranean Sea and inland into Persia»[48] and who were not Ḥimyarites (Homeritae as described by the two authors)[49] but Arabs ethnically and linguistically. As these facts are not indicated in *Holy Women* and as they are important to bear in mind, it is necessary to treat them in the context of an article entitled «Arab Women of Oriens Christianus Arabicus», and begin by explaining the genesis of this problem of identity as it pertains to these martyresses.

1. The confusion began with the *Book of the Himyarites* itself. The author, whoever he was, naturally used the term «Ḥimyarite» throughout since Ḥimyar was the well-known term for that region of cultural dominance in Arabia in ancient times and in Late Antiquity, namely South Arabia, Arabia Felix, whose inhabitants were known as Ḥimyarites, and Homeritae to the classical writers. The author, a zealous Monophysite, is not an ethnologist but an ecclesiastical writer who perceives all the martyrs of South Arabia as Christians united by their faith, their spirituality and their martyrdom. So he simply referred to them by the terms «Ḥimyarites» in much the same way that the martyrs of Persia are called «Persian» despite the fact that they belonged to various ethnic groups[50].

In modern times when the *Book* was recovered and published by Axel Moberg, its title appeared as *The Book of the Ḥimyarites*, thus perpetuating the misconception that the martyrs were all Ḥimyarites. Its editor went along with the term in spite of the fact that many indications should have convinced him that the Naǧrānite martyrs of South Arabia were not Ḥimyarites[51]. A title such as «The Book of the South Arabian Martyrs»

47) See BROCK and HARVEY, *Holy Women*, p. 103, n.8; p. 111, n.18; p. 120, n.25.
48) *Ibid.*, p. 1.
49) *Ibid.*, p. 100.
50) And so described, *ibid.*, p. 63.
51) The onomasticon alone should have convinced him that the inhabitants of Naǧrān were not Ḥimyarites but Arabs. It is resoundingly Arab and the onomasticon in this period was reflective of ethnicity, but it only left the editor puzzled; see *Book*, pp. LXXVIII-XCVII.

would have been more accurate since that capacious term «South Arabia» would have comprised those who were Ḥimyarites and those who were not. So the title of the *Book* has been misleading scholars on the identity of the Naǧrānite martyrs and it was in this way that the terminological confusion reached the two Syrologists who thus have simply inherited the term Ḥimyarite with which they described the martyrs of Naǧrān.

2. The truth, however, is that South Arabia was a bi-morphic region, ethnically and linguistically, Arab and Sabaean (or Ḥimyarite) and Naǧrān belonged to the Arab area of that region not the Sabaean/Ḥimyarite. Its language was Arabic not Sabaic and the fact is well known to all philologists who are conversant with both Arabic and Sabaic. Those who are only Sabaicists and not Arabists tend to operate with the misconception of the Ḥimyarite character of the entire South Arabian region. One of the few Sabaicists who was both a Sabaicist and also an Arabist (and not just one who has a nodding acquaintance with the latter language as a comparative Semitic philologist), was the late A.F.L. Beeston, a leading Sabaic epigrapher who finally found himself sitting on the Laudian Chair of Arabic at Oxford. He knew that two languages prevailed in the South Arabian region, Arabic and Sabaic, which he called Ṣayhadic as the all inclusive term for the non-Arabic language of the region with all its dialectical variations. Speaking of the Musnad, the Sabaic script and its diffusion in Arabia, he says that it was used «for rendering Arabic» in Qaryat al-Faw and in Naǧrān[52]. It is unfortunate that he expressed himself on this important matter in 1984, not earlier, and before his less fortunate Sabaicist colleagues expressed some untenable views on the language of Naǧrān[53].

3. The correct identification of the ethnic and linguistic affiliation of the martyrs and martyresses of Naǧrān is a matter of considerable importance not only as a contribution to the better ethnic and linguistic cartography of the South Arabian region but also to the history of the new ecclesiastical province that South Arabia became in the sixth century and it has wider

52) See his *Sabaic Grammar* (University of Manchester, 1984) 5. On the employment of the Musnad script in the two towns of Qaryat al-Faw and Naǧrān, he was of course positive on Qaryat al-Faw in view of the many Arabic inscriptions written in Musnad, which left no doubt whatsoever on the employment of that script there. As only a few inscriptions have been found in Naǧrān, Beeston was forced to say of the employment of the Musnad, that it was «perhaps also» used there. But he leaves no doubt that the *language* of Naǧrān was Arabic.

53) See the present writer in «The Martyrs of Naǧrān: Miscellaneous Reflections», in *Le Muséon* 93 (1980) 154-157.

implications for the religious history of the Arabs before the rise of Islam.

a. The *Book of the Ḥimyarites* has not survived in its entirety, only in fragments, but the Table of Contents miraculously has. An examination of it reveals that of the twenty six chapters that described the various martyrdoms in South Arabia, twenty one are devoted to the persecutions and martyrdoms in Arab Naǧrān, while only one chapter is devoted to Ẓafār and the massacre of the Abyssinians in it, two chapters to Ḥaḍramawt, one to Ma'rib and another to Hajarēn[54]. Consequently the fact that emerges is that the area in the region that bore the brunt of the persecutions and martyrdoms was not the Ḥimyarite, but the Arab, represented by Naǧrān, which as the seat of the South Arabian Episcopate, was the stronghold of Christianity in South Arabia[55].

b. The separation of Arab Naǧrān from the Ḥimyarite South has wider implications for the religious history of the Arabs before the rise of Islam, as this separation allocates it to the Arab area in the north to which it belonged ethnically and linguistically. Immediately after the martyrdoms and the Abyssinian Conquest of the region, Naǧrān became the Arab and Arabian martyropolis, the pilgrimage center in the Peninsula for the Christian Arabs in the sixth century. But already in that century and even before, Mecca, the neighbor to the north, had become such a center for the Arabs, where prevailed a syncretistic religion that was basically pagan and polytheistic. Naǧrān in the south became a strong rival of Mecca in the north as a pilgrimage center for the Arabs of the Peninsula whose spiritual and religious life in this crucial center was largely under the influence of one or the other of these two rival centers. The scales were finally tipped in favor of Mecca in the north, when suddenly it witnessed the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad, who determined the orientation of the Arabs of the Peninsula towards the new and third Abrahamic religion - Islam. Mecca superseded Naǧrān as the only Holy City of the Arabs in the Peninsula and the latter thus first withered and then completely disappeared as a pilgrimage center a few years after the death of Muḥammad[56].

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54) See *Book*, pp. CII-CIII.

55) The fact is sensed by J. TUBACH when he speaks of Christianity in South Arabia as *insbesondere die Landschaft Nagran*; see his «Eine christliche Legende syrischer Herkunft in der Prophetenbiographie Ibn Hišāms», in *OLP* 26 (1995) 81.

56) For the demise of Naǧrān as well as its rise as a pilgrimage center, see SHAHĪD, «Byzantium in South Arabia».

CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing treatment will have indicated the extensive presence that the Arab women of the Christian Orient had in pre-Islamic times. It remains to draw some conclusions on this presence and mark its significance.

a. In the history of Arab *imperial* women, which extended for more than a millennium before the inception of the proto-Byzantine period, the *Christian* members of the Arab imperial Royal House belong to the third phase in this long historical span of Arab history. In ancient Semitic times, during the Assyrian period, Arab history had witnessed the rule of such queens as Zabibi, Samsi, and Telkhunu and in Roman times such figures as the empresses of the Severan Dynasty: Julia Domna, Maesa, and Sohaema, and after them Queen Zenobia of Palmyra. Finally after the crude and then the refined paganism of the Semitic and the Graeco-Roman periods respectively, Arab women entered the Age of Spirituality, opened by the conversion of Constantine, and some of the Arab church women among them climbed the spiritual ladder of that Faith reaching its topmost rung, reserved for those who suffer martyrdom.

b. This presence was sometimes unique. Mavia presents the spectacle of a heroic figure, a woman in shining armor, fighting the Roman emperor himself and for the sake of orthodoxy; her case is unparalleled in this period. The extraordinary events that unfolded in sixth-century Naǧrān present the spectacle of martyrdoms taking place after the Peace of the Church and the Edict of Milan. What is more, the Arab martyresses are impressive by their numbers, almost one hundred, who chose death to renouncing their Christian Faith. These two features make the martyrdom of these Arab women truly unique in the annals of the Christian Church of this proto-Byzantine period.

c. Just as the Arab women of this period contributed to Christianity martyresses and a warrior queen, so did Christianity contribute much towards projecting a spiritually attractive image of Arab womanhood in this period. The Universalistic Faith that Christianity was and that canonized these martyresses has enabled these women to step beyond the circumscribed Arab and Arabian cultural frontier and cross the threshhold of ethnicity, when it united them with the larger *orbis* of Christianity and of Mediterranean Christendom. In so doing, it has ensured for them a certain immortality (if immortality consists in being remembered), and this is most concretely reflected on October 24th of each sanctoral cycle, when the Uni-

versal Church, especially in the East, celebrates the Feast of Martyress Ruhm/Ruhayma and her companions, who laid down their lives in the distant past of the sixth century in the South Arabian martyropolis - Naǧrān.

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